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This Is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1860-1927

Kristen Epps

Review

Epps, Kristen

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Not a Free State After All: African Americans and Racist Violence in the North

In January 1870, a white mob broke into a local jail, kidnapped a black prisoner named George Johnson, tied him to a horse, drug him across town, and then hanged him. As one observer wrote, Johnson was “torn, mangled, and bruised…. It is hardly possible that there was much life remaining in the body at the time it was thrown over the bridge, suspended from the rope" (27). Johnson’s lynching was documented in the local newspaper and served as a warning to other blacks in the community. It was the sixteenth lynching in the area since the outbreak of the Civil War.

This happened in Atchison, Kansas. It did not occur in the South. The standard trope of race relations in America often depicts white Northerners as paragons of racial acceptance, and white Southerners as white supremacists capable of extreme violence toward African Americans. Thus, when discussing lynching, race riots, and other forms of racist violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emphasis often turns southward. Brent Campney’s *This Is Not Dixie* builds on current historiography by challenging these assumptions, exploring why Kansas specifically “has been viewed through a conceptual prism much more forgiving than the one applied to the South" (1). He argues that most white Kansans were actually racial conservatives who worked to convert the state’s more radical whites to white supremacy, and who did not shrink at using violence to maintain racial order. Moreover white Kansans in the 1850s and 1860s were just as committed to white supremacy as whites in later decades, thanks partly to the media’s role in shaping public perceptions of African Americans. In fact, whites in both rural and urban areas capitalized on the spectacle of public violence throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction

periods to a much higher degree than previous literature on the subject has acknowledged. His careful tallying of violent episodes shows that the highest number of lynchings occurred between 1866 and 1874, when twenty-five black men lost their lives in sixteen incidents. From 1861 to 1877, there were thirteen race riots in Kansas. As Campney demonstrates, the standard trope simply does not hold up under scrutiny.

In this work, Campney also redefines how we categorize racist violence. He uses the term *racist* violence instead of *racial* violence because violence was a mechanism for terrorizing the black population to enforce their submission, as opposed to violence that merely crossed racial lines (i.e. white-on-black violence of other sorts). Racist violence was much more than just lynching. He uses three categories—sensational violence, threatened violence, and routine violence—to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced model for understanding these threats to the black community. Although sensational violence (which he defines as lynching, race riots, mobs, “killing-by-police," and homicide) forms the heart of this study, he also unpacks how threats of violence and intimidation were expressed through sundown town ordinances, segregation, and attacks on inter-racial marriage. Routine violence (which he defines as including rape) was something that occurred so regularly as to become commonplace. Overall, he contends that a more holistic approach to understanding violence best illustrates the systemic nature of white supremacy.

A central theme in this work is the deep contradiction between the perception of Kansas as a free state, grounded in its history during “Bleeding Kansas," and the prevalence of racist violence. White Kansans of this period (and even today) extol their state’s virtuous position as a place of freedom, eliding the racial tensions, discrimination, and violence often inflicted upon blacks in the state. As Campney notes, this “Free State" narrative serves an important rhetorical purpose: by casting racist violence as only a Southern problem, white Kansans can “then deny, sanitize, or simply *not see* the profound anti-black racism in their own sections" (9). This avoidance tactic served to bolster white supremacist policies, institutions, and actions.

Campney comes to some thought-provoking conclusions in this study. For instance, he emphasizes that the comparatively low level of violence in the state was not due to whites’ welcoming attitude toward other races. Put simply, the conditions of their lives were different from white Southerners, who experienced federal occupation during the Civil War and Reconstruction in addition to the

transition from slave labor to free labor. Southern whites also lived in closer proximity to large black populations. White Kansans did not face these structural difficulties, and while the black population in the state did increase during the Civil War and Reconstruction, blacks still remained a clear minority and were not central to the agricultural economy. Still, despite demographic and social differences between Kansas and the South, many of the same issues existed in both regions and served as triggers for violence. Campney discusses triggers such as white fears of miscegenation, the myth of the black rapist (alleged rapists were often targets of lynching or attempted lynching), a desire to protect white labor, and in the case of immigrants, an attempt to assert their whiteness by attacking blacks. While the number of victims may have been lower proportionally, the fact that it existed at all gives the lie to Free State mythology.

Although his analysis could be more extensive in this regard, Campney also concludes that the black community was much more effective in resisting violence than one might imagine. This resistance began organically, but as the twentieth century approached, there was more institutionalized resistance from groups like the NAACP. Armed self-defense, particularly in attempts to stop lynchings, was remarkably prevalent. He has documented twenty-two “jailhouse defenses" in the period between 1890 and 1916, as one example. Various black organizations and demographic groups—including Civil War veterans, middle-class entrepreneurs, the black press, and women’s clubs—challenged white supremacy by exerting political pressure, boycotting, or using legal means to defend their rights. Occasionally white Kansans joined in the struggle, but racial conservatives successfully swayed most white radicals to their cause, so white resistance usually focused on ending *all* mob violence instead of addressing systemic prejudices directed at African Americans.

Although at times the narrative seems repetitive, and he relies quite heavily on newspapers as evidence, overall this work provides timely insights into racist violence in the North. This may not have been Dixie in a literal sense, but Campney shows how the racist violence commonly associated with the South extended across the nation.

Kristen Epps teaches American history at the University of Central Arkansas and is the author of Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas-Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Eras *(Georgia, 2016).*